

As American soldiers continue their search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Atlanta author Daniel Levitas warns that the threat posed by homegrown terrorists should not be overlooked. As evidence of the continued danger, he points to the case of William Krar, a 62-year-old manufacturer of gun parts and a right-wing extremist who has pleaded guilty in federal court to possessing a sodium cyanide bomb and is due to be sentenced in February, along with two compatriots. When Krar was arrested last April in Texas, federal officials also found a half-million rounds of ammunition, more than 60 pipe bombs, briefcase bombs, land mine components, a cache of deadly chemicals and a trove of neo-Nazi, antigovernment literature.

Levitas is a writer, researcher and expert on the activities of racist, anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi organizations and the author of *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right*, recently released in paperback by St. Martin's Press (Griffin).

According to Levitas, who has testified for nearly two decades as an expert witness in

state, federal and Canadian courts, the Krar case is only the most recent and dramatic example of the threat posed by domestic terrorists. James Kopp, who was found guilty in 2003 for the 1998 shooting of Dr. Barnett Slepian in Buffalo, N.Y., was affiliated with the shadowy underground anti-abortion network the Army of God. Matthew Hale, leader of the white supremacist group the World Church of the Creator, is due to stand trial in Chicago this year on charges of soliciting the murder of a federal judge. And Rafael Davila, a former Army National Guard intelligence officer from Washington State, is awaiting trial in Spokane, Wash., on espionage-related charges for allegedly stealing — and then planning to distribute — highly classified military documents to white supremacists in North Carolina, Texas and Georgia.

"Americans should question whether the Justice Department is making America's far-right fanatics a serious priority," Levitas told me. "And with the FBI still struggling to get up to speed on the threat posed by Islamic extremists abroad, it is questionable whether the agency

has the manpower to keep tabs on our distinctly American terror cells."

Levitas' book traces the emergence of white supremacist paramilitary groups from their roots in the post-Civil War period, through the segregationist violence of the civil rights era to the present. He also examines the early days of right-wing tax protest in the 1960s and 1970s, the farm crisis of the 1980s and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. In addition, Levitas outlines the contemporary movement's dangerous preoccupation with biological warfare such as anthrax.

Levitas recently spoke with me about the ideological roots of the white supremacist movement; the current state of far right and neo-Nazi organizing; the increase in anti-Semitism and anti-Arab bigotry in the wake of 9-11; and the likelihood that homegrown terrorists will strike again. Levitas' book was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award in 2002.

**We heard a lot about the militia movement in the 1990s. How come we don't hear much about them today?**

**Daniel Levitas:** The events of 9-11 have really overshadowed everything on the subject of terrorism, and so if the story is not about fanatically violent Islamicists or the discovery of weapons of mass destruction in the desert of Iraq, it is harder to focus the attention of both the media and law enforcement. Of course, there have been high-profile stories about the radical right here at home — the arrest of alleged abortion clinic bomber Eric Rudolph is a good example — but, by and large, there is just less interest in our American versions of Al Qaeda. Rest assured, if the arsenals attributed to right-wing extremists were found in the hands of people linked to Islamic terrorists here in the United States, we'd be hearing very often and loudly about it from the U.S. Attorney General, John Ashcroft.

**That's straightforward enough. But isn't it also true that the militia movement basically fell apart after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing?**

The militias were dealt a major setback, yes, but the movement hasn't entirely collapsed.

"American Taliban"

his home in Buffalo, N.Y. Previous page: Pastor James P. Wickstrom (left), a leader of Posse Comitatus, speaks at an Aryan Nations World Congress in 2002. Wickstrom with two other anti-semitic "pastors" (right); a girl waves a racist flag at a parade in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho (center).

Membership probably peaked at around 10,000 in the mid-1990s, and then fell sharply due to all the negative publicity and an extensive government crackdown after the destruction of the Murrah Building. Of course, the FBI and the Justice Department had been pretty clueless about the militias before the bombing, but afterwards they put on the heat. A lot of militia followers dropped out as a result. Some of them also left the movement in fear and disgust. They signed up to fight the blue-helmeted U.N. invaders of the "New World Order," not to kill innocent American civilians. And for many of these activists, seeing 168 corpses dragged from the rubble of the Murrah Building was enough to get them to quit.

**Didn't the Y2K millennium scare have something to do with the decline of the militia movement, also?**

Yes, but it was kind of icing on the cake. The militias really took it on the chin in 1997 and 1998. Then, in the year or so leading up to Y2K, the far right went into overdrive with its predic-

tions of domestic chaos and the end of civilization. A lot of this fear-mongering was built on the racist prejudices of those far-right activists living in isolated rural communities in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest who believe that urban blacks and other minorities will come streaming out of the cities during times of chaos to wreak havoc. The militias told their followers to spend thousands of dollars on weapons and other survivalist gear to survive the coming riots. Basically, they merchandized the hell out of Y2K. But when the millennium came and went without incident, quite a few supporters felt ripped off and the militias lost further credibility and more recruits.

**What about the people who didn't quit the movement?**

They have become even more radicalized, more hard-core. After all, they believe that the Clinton administration bombed the Murrah Building on purpose — and set up Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols as patsies in order to persecute the "Patriot" movement. This is the

same crowd that believes that the planes used on 9-11 were remote-controlled by the Israeli Mossad and the CIA. They used the tragedy at Waco to bolster their argument. "Look," they said, "if Bill Clinton and Janet Reno could kill all those innocent Branch Davidians down in Waco, what makes you think they weren't behind the Oklahoma City bombing?" This all fit in rather nicely with fanatical gun culture and extreme religious beliefs of the radical right. After all, the Davidians were wanted on gun charges and had unconventional religious beliefs. So, for those white supremacists who worship fully automatic weapons and believe that Jews are the children of Satan, it wasn't all that difficult to convince them that the government was out to murder them, as well.

**Is this really a new trend? I thought that this process of radicalization began long before Oklahoma City. After all, back in 1984, there were neo-Nazi groups like the Order, whose members killed radio talk show host Alan Berg in Denver and plotted to overthrow the government.**

You're absolutely right, but the Oklahoma City bombing and the events of 9-11 have accelerated that process. And the seeds for the destruction of the Murrah Building were planted many years earlier, in 1978, with books like *The Turner Diaries* by William Pierce (writing under the pseudonym Andrew McDonald), the founder of the neo-Nazi group the National Alliance. As I tell the story in the book, it also was men like William Potter Gale, who founded the right-wing Posse Comitatus — which is Latin for "Power of the County" — back in 1971, who helped move the radical right in a more violent, revolutionary direction.

**What set it all off, then; this process of far-right radicalization?**

This really began as a rejection of the social progress of the 1960s, and, most importantly, as a reaction to the actions taken by the federal government and the courts to end segregation and promote civil rights, however haltingly. But

**SEE HATE GROUPS P.21**

## HATE GROUPS FROM P.19

you can also go back further, to, say, 1948, when President Harry Truman ended segregation in the military. Then came the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation with the Brown decision in 1954. And after that came the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. By the early 1970s, you had this growing constituency of Americans, many who had been involved in the losing fight to preserve segregation, who now began to see the federal government as more of the central enemy. The emerging anti-government message of these groups owed a great deal to the vicious anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that had always circulated within the movement. After all, the belief in an all-powerful cabal of bloodthirsty Jews has been around for generations. It was in this environment that William Pierce and others launched a deliberate effort to refocus right-wing resentment from run-of-the-mill race hatred to a more explicitly revolutionary philosophy. Groups like the Aryan Nations in Idaho — which is now defunct — and the leaders of the Order did this too. They left a lot of bodies in their wake, including more than a handful of murdered law enforcement officials. After 20 years of that, it really was kind of predictable that guys like Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were going to come along and do something as heinous as blowing up the Murrah Building.

**So race was a key issue in motivating people to join right-wing groups and movements, but what about the economy? Most people assume that recruiting for groups like the KKK and the Militias goes best during an economic crisis. Isn't this also a driving factor?**

Economic issues and themes have always played a significant role in right-wing propaganda and recruitment, but people still wrongly overestimate its influence. After all, when the KKK grew to nearly four million members in the 1920s, it was a period of tremendous economic growth. And during the Great Depression that followed, many Americans turned not to right-wing social movements but in the opposite direction, joining labor unions and voting for Roosevelt. Yes, pro-Hitler demagogues got a fair amount of mileage out of the Depression, but overall the country shifted to the left. In the 1950s and '60s, when segregationists mounted their huge campaign of "Massive Resistance" to integration, the economy was booming. And when the militia movement got going in the early 1990s that also was a period of economic growth. What really drove the militias was passage of federal gun control legislation in 1993 and 1994, not fears about the economy. Of course, during the farm crisis of the 1980s, when interest rates hit double digits and farmers were filing bankruptcy in droves, the radical right had an easier time selling their conspiracy theories about "Jewish bankers." Basically, it is an oversimplification to say that hard times lead to scapegoating and bigotry.

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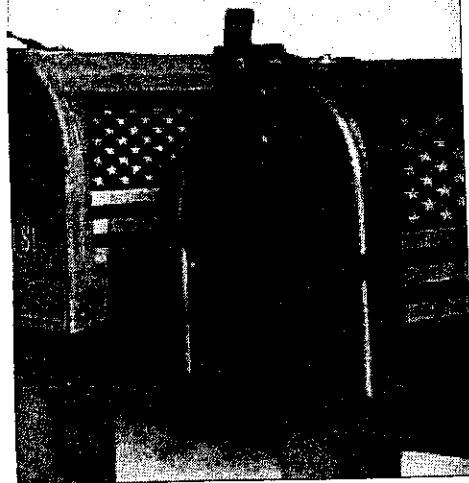


**firepower and anti-government zeal of the radical right, the law enforcement community ought to take these groups more seriously. Yet you've written critically about the FBI and the Justice Department in this regard. Is enough attention being paid to the paramilitary right?**

The Oklahoma City bombing was a huge wake-up call to the law enforcement community and the American public. But there were incidents long before 1995, which also prompted increased scrutiny by the Feds. There were the killings, in 1983, of two U.S. Marshals in North Dakota by Gordon Kahl, a tax-protesting farmer and member of the Posse Comitatus. The Order also got a lot of attention when it nabbed more than \$3 million from an armored car in California the following year. But one of the

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basic problems has been that the FBI and the Justice Department have not created substantial incentives for those agents who do make a point of specializing in white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups; it isn't really seen as a path to career advancement.

Before the post-Oklahoma City crackdown, there had not been a serious effort to bust illegal right-wing activity since the Feds locked up two-dozen members of the Order in 1985 and then went after the political leaders of the movement with a raft of sedition indictments in 1987 — and failed. And there really has never been a concerted effort to infiltrate and disrupt the violent wing of the anti-abortion movement. That has just been deemed too politically sensitive.

Some Justice Department officials like to complain that their hands have been tied because of the restrictive rules issued by

Congress in the wake of all the civil liberties abuses of former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that came to light in the mid-1970s. But I don't really buy that argument. There is plenty of illegal activity on the radical right and ample probable cause to initiate legitimate criminal investigations within the confines of the law. Of course, in the post-9-11 era, a lot of those restrictions have been severely weakened, so theoretically we shouldn't be hearing those excuses.

## What was the reaction of these groups to 9-11?

A number of neo-Nazi groups were tremendously animated: They praised the terrorists of Al Qaeda, even though they denounced them in racist terms because they were Arabs. "We may not want them marrying our daughters. But anyone who is willing to fly a plane into a building to kill Jews is all right by me," said one of the leaders of the National Alliance. "My only concern is that we Aryans didn't do this and that the rag-heads are ahead of us on the Lone Wolf point scale," said another.

These folks call themselves "patriots" and defenders of the constitution, but some of them are just as theologically committed to murder as the most violent fanatics of radical Islam. Based on what we've seen post 9-11, we cannot afford to be concerned about terrorism as simply a "foreign" phenomenon. From the earliest days of the Ku Klux Klan, domestic hate groups have been all too eager to perpetrate terrorism against their fellow Americans.

## Given all that you've said, what is the state of the far-right movement today?

Thankfully, much of the movement is in pretty serious disarray, due to a combination of factors, but that doesn't mean the potential for violence is all that significantly diminished. If anything, the arrests in Tyler, Texas, in April 2002 show that even small numbers of right-wing activists can build up a terrifying arsenal. The death of William Pierce, in July 2002, left a big leadership vacuum, both in his group and in the movement. Smaller but equally militant groups like the World Church of the Creator, based in Illinois, have been hit hard by recent arrests. In the case of the WCOTC, its leader, Matthew Hale, is currently in federal prison facing charges that he attempted to solicit the murder of a federal judge. Even though membership in the Klan and other hate groups is down, the people that have remained in the movement are more hard-core. But there is another, more dangerous problem that is affecting the political mainstream.

## What is that?

What concerns me most is the rising level of prejudice and bigotry in American society, and  
**SEE HATE GROUPS P.23**

## HATE GROUPS FROM P.21

these attitudes have penetrated well beyond the confines of the far right. More specifically, we're experiencing rising anti-Semitism, skyrocketing anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry, heightened hostility toward foreigners and immigrants and persistently high levels of racism. In short, these trends don't bode well for the fabric of a democracy ostensibly devoted to protecting civil rights and liberties. Of course it is easy to point to the bombers and shooters of the radical right and identify them as the problem. And they certainly pose a threat and a challenge. In the end, however, their actions basically require a law enforcement response, and there is not a whole lot that everyday citizens can do to counteract the hard-core criminality of domestic right-wing terrorists.

**When you talk about rising levels of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bigotry, can you be more specific? How are these things measured?**

According to the latest and most comprehensive surveys, fully 17 percent of adult Americans are "strongly anti-Semitic." These 35 million people don't just disagree with Israeli policies toward Palestinians or think that Jews control the media. In order to be considered anti-Semitic according to this research, you have to agree with a whopping six or more anti-Jewish stereotypes like: "Jews have too much power," "Jews don't care what happens to anyone but their own kind," "Jews always like to be at the head of things," and more.

Anti-Semitism has been steadily declining since the end of World War II, but this 17-percent figure is the first recorded increase since social scientists first began asking these questions 40 years ago. That's disturbing. Even worse, people 35 and younger appear to be more anti-Semitic than preceding generations. Other polls have reliably found that a shocking 65 million Americans still believe that Jews killed Christ, 58 million believe that Jews control Wall Street, 48 million think that Jews control the media and 24 percent of people 55 years and older blame "Jewish executives in Hollywood" for "sex and immorality in our popular culture." That's anti-Semitism.

But just because more people are feeling increasingly uncomfortable with Jews doesn't mean they're friendlier toward Arabs or Muslims, or vice-versa. Forty-four percent of people in one 2002 poll said they viewed Muslims as a "threat to the moral character of America." That's double the number (21 percent) who said the same thing about Jews. And in the wake of 9-11, nearly one-third of Americans endorsed the idea of taking special security measures against Arab Americans and immigrants who came from supposedly "unfriendly" countries.

When you talk about persistent levels of racism in society, the data isn't all that heartening, either. Forty percent of Alabama voters cast

ballots in favor of keeping a constitutional ban on interracial marriage as part of the state constitution in the year 2000. Sixty percent of whites voted for former Klansman David Duke in the 1990 race for U.S. Senate in Louisiana; and Duke was still able to get 141,000 people to vote for him in 1996 when he tried to run again. Thankfully, he is in federal prison right now after pleading guilty to bilking his followers and cheating on his taxes.

**What role, if any, has the Internet played in the spread of these ideas or in the recruitment efforts by the radical right?**

The Internet has certainly enabled folks on the far right to circulate plenty of hate propaganda and scurrilous conspiracy theories at minimal expense. This has helped with the spread of everything from Holocaust denial to bogus tracts about black genetic inferiority and fear mongering about non-white immigration. However, there is nothing preventing civil rights groups and others from using the Internet to counter this propaganda or promote an alternative worldview. So as "bad" as the Internet might be as a vehicle to spread hate, it can and should be used in the opposite fashion. The bigger question has to do with how the Internet is used to actually organize people, and I don't think that right-wing paramilitary groups have succeeded very well in that arena. The Internet is still not an adequate substitute for old-fashioned, face-to-face organizing for these groups.

**In light of all we've discussed, what do you think should be done?**

There is no single, simple answer to dealing with either the problem of paramilitary terrorism or the bigotry that animates the radical right and larger sectors of the public. Clearly, the Justice Department and other law enforcement agencies need to make these groups a higher priority. And they need to keep their focus consistent over the long term.

When it comes to the problem of broader prejudice in society, there are many things that need to be done. More resources are needed for curriculum development and work with young people. Religious, community and political leaders need to condemn intolerance more forcefully. Legislation is clearly required to deter and punish discrimination against a variety of groups. As America approaches the year 2050, when whites will no longer be a majority in the United States, we need to use the mechanisms and tools of democracy, and work even harder, to build a truly multi-racial, multi-cultural, inclusive society.

*Bill Berkowitz is a freelance writer covering right-wing groups and movements. His column appears twice weekly in Working Assets' Working For Change.*